Adapting executive function interventions for the digital age

This supplemental handout provides suggestions for adapting the research-based interventions to digital homework assignment and completion systems. (link)

As technology continues to improve, schools are more often relying on computer-based systems for the assignment, completion and turning in of homework. The COVID pandemic accelerated schools' movement toward the use of online homework systems and many schools have continued to use the systems that were developed. Digital systems offer opportunities for improved ease of communication and collaboration between parents and teachers. These systems also offer features that can help students know what their homework is, while also presenting new types of challenges.

Online homework assignment systems reduce the need for students to write down their homework and allow students to access what they need to do at home. Such systems also allow parents the ability to access students' homework assignments and provide some accountability for completing them. When all teachers are using these systems and keeping them up to date, the digital homework assignment systems can be a valuable resource. However, if any teacher ever assigns homework that is not accurately described on the online system, the online system does not capture this. In such situations, children/teens with ADHD might be less likely to hear the teacher say that an assignment is different than what is in the system and write it down, which can lead to missed homework assignments. Even if the teen notes that the homework assignment is different from what is online, parents do not know that, which can lead to increased conflict with parents about what needs to be done for homework.

For children and teens with ADHD, a challenge using digital homework assignment systems can be making sure that all assignments are complete and turned in. Without the assistance of a paper and pencil checklist, students may start their homework and then get distracted by something and forget that they never finished their homework. In addition, students may complete their homework, but forget to click on the turn it in button or do whatever other procedure is needed to turn homework assignments in. This can lead to students not getting credit for homework that they did. Students may benefit from a paper and pencil checklist with prompts to check what homework assignments they have for each class, complete the homework for each class and turn in the homework for each class, to prevent glitches that occur due to getting interrupted or distracted in the middle of doing homework.

Another challenge of online systems is that distracting website and social media communications are only a click away. The easy access to these 'fun' things can make it much more difficult for a children and teens, especially ones with ADHD, to resist getting distracted and doing something other than homework during homework time. It is important for parents and children/teens to setup monitoring systems to reduce the temptation to do something other than homework during homework time by making it easier for a caregiver to see that the child/teen is distracted. If the computer is not needed for the completion of homework,

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printing out the online list of assignments at the beginning of homework time so that the child/teen does not need to access it online can help reduce the temptation to be distracted by other online things during homework time. Using device management systems like those that turn off social media notices help teens not be distracted by social communications during homework.

Another common challenge of online systems is that there is often a time lag between when homework is turned in and when it is graded and posted as complete in the online system. Systems used by a specific school vary in the extent to which this is an issue, but most schools have some delays in notification of turned in assignments. This delay can make it appear to parents that their child/teen did not turn in homework, when in fact the homework was already turned in but not yet graded. Unless the system has a 'turned in' status noted in the system (which many do not), the student is not able to double check whether they turned in their assignment in the system. Setting up paper and pencil systems where the student has a printed or written list of what needed to be done and then notes on the list when an assignment has been completed and turned in can help students and their parents know when they have turned in assignments.

For information regarding adapting specific child/teen OTMP skills training interventions for implementation in schools with digital homework systems, see the manuals for each respective intervention (Organizational skills Training, OST, Gallagher, et al, 2014; The Homework, Organization and Planning Skills, HOPS; Langberg, 2022; Supporting Teens' Autonomy Daily, STAND, Sibley, 2017).

References

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Langberg, J.M. (2022). Homework, Organization, and Planning Skills (HOPS) Intervention: A Treatment Manual, 2nd ed.. National Association of School Psychologists (NASP). Bethesda, MD.

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